

The Mass and the Community of God

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We all know that the mass is the centre of our lives, that it is the most important thing in the life of the Church; but often we have to make a real effort to see this. It is not the obvious proposition it ought to be. We even have to make an effort to show that the Church really thinks this, rather than simply saying it for effect. What began as a common meal, feeding the people of God both with physical food and with the food of scripture, has become a largely silent ritual performed by one man with his back to the people in a dead foreign language. The bread which we eat has been carefully manufactured to look as little like bread as possible, and there has grown up a tradition that one should, out of reverence, avoid chewing it. Clearly there are reasons why all this should be so, some of them better than others, but looking at our modern liturgy from a distance shows why it is so hard to believe the truth about it. It is of the first significance that the Council Fathers, in their intention to reform the Church, have begun with the reform of the liturgy; it is in the liturgy that the Church is constituted, and to make changes here is eventually to change the life of the Church. It is significant, too, that with the decline in people's understanding of the mass came the growth of extra-liturgical practices. The recitation of the rosary in a body while mass is being celebrated, with only a pause for the consecration; the habit of preaching throughout mass; the separation of mass and communion; these things are fortunately either condemned or are dying, but there are other disquieting symptoms. It is still a matter of common experience that many people think of the body of Christ as something to be worshipped rather than eaten, though it was given to us as food. We have stopped thinking of the *eucharistia*, the sacrifice of thanksgiving; now we call it the mass.

Fortunately all this is changing, partly because of the wealth of new thinking about the Church at all levels, and partly because of the reforms gradually being worked out by the Council. But just because this is a moment when our attitude to everything in the Church is having to be rethought, it is worth looking at what we think about the

mass too. In this article I want to consider it in one particular way; the sense in which we see mass as the assembly of Christians in a particular place, which in itself constitutes the Church, without which the Church would not exist.

The called assembly (qahal). The Church really is the new Israel; in using the phrase we are not just giving voice to a pious platitude. The people of Israel were the people of God; it is not simply that the Jews are no longer the people of God but that we are, which makes us take the title 'the New Israel'. What was true for the old Israel is true for us. There are more than mere parallels between the theology of the Old Testament and that of the New. It is the same theology, but with a new dimension, transformed as the world is transformed by the coming of Christ. Though there has been new revelation in Christ it has not destroyed the old, but fulfilled it.

God was present to the world through the Jews, but he was present to the Jews on Sinai, in the ark, in the temple. It was a presence not to individuals, but to the community. The record of Israel's dealings with the Lord is the record of the people as a whole being called to meet him at some holy place. The primordial instance of such a meeting is on Sinai: 'On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled. Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God; and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain' (Ex. 19. 16-17). On this occasion the great covenant was made between God and his people, the covenant that constituted them as a *qahal*, an assembly not simply fortuitous, but called for a special purpose.

Later in the history of Israel the holy place of meeting became the Tent of Meeting or Tabernacle (Lev. 4. 13-21; 8. 3-10; 16. 16-17; Num. 3. 7-25; 18. 3; Deut. 31. 15; Josh. 22. 19; etc.), and then the shrine of the ark (1 Ch. 6. 31-32; Ps. 74. 7; etc.). But it was always an occasion that caused such a meeting for Israel. It was in such an assembly that the Jews became the great congregation, assumed the identity that made them the people of God. 'So Solomon held the feast at that time, and all Israel with him, a great assembly [*qahal*], from the entrance of Hamath to the Brook of Egypt before the Lord our God seven days.' (1 Kings 8. 65). 'Then David said to all the assembly, "Bless the Lord your God." And all the assembly blessed the Lord, the God of their fathers, and bowed their heads, and worshipped the Lord, and did

obedience to the king' (1 Ch. 29. 20). The same sense of an officially constituted people of God performing a priestly act (Ex. 19. 6) is to be found in many passages in the Old Testament. Typical of them is 2 Ch. 30. 13: 'And many people came together in Jerusalem to keep the feast of unleavened bread in the second month, a very great assembly'. It was precisely in this situation that the Jews understood and fulfilled their vocation as the people of God. The law, which was the form of their dedication to God, was all centred on the great religious observances. But these observances were that in which each Jew became fully one of the people of God. He found the fullness of his individuality in his membership of the *qahal*, because it was the *qahal* that God knew and with whom he treated. Even at Sinai it was the Jews as a whole with whom he dealt. Moses was the representative, the just man of God who stood in the people's place.

Service of God was again properly performed in the *qahal*:

I will tell of thy name to my brethren;
in the midst of the congregation I will praise thee:
From thee comes my praise in the great congregation
my vows will I pay before those who fear him.

(Ps. 22. 23, 25).

A plea takes the same kind of form; God is reminded not of the virtue of the man making the plea, or even of past acts of a group, instead he is reminded of the existence of the *qahal*, because it is the other party to the great covenant, the means of God's manifestation to the world:

Remember thy congregation, which thou hast gotten of old,
which thou hast redeemed to be the tribe of thy heritage.

(Ps. 74. 2).

To be cut off from Israel, to be excommunicated, so to say, was the direst of penalties, it involved in some real sense a loss of identity. It was a sanction that was particularly applied in cases where the numinous power of God was in question (Lev. 22. 3), and it was a sanction that was seen as total disaster whether it was imposed by the community or by personal evil.

Thou hast caused my companions to shun me;
thou hast made me a thing of horror to them.

I am shut in so that I cannot escape; (Ps. 88. 8).

The song of Hezekiah king of Judah has the same burden (Is. 38. 10-20); to be cut off from Israel is really to be left out in the cold, to be 'consigned to the gates of Sheol', in other words to be thought of as lost, even less than human.

The central act of community of Israel, the people of God, was the celebration of the Passover. *Pesach* was the name given by the Jews to the feast celebrating the deliverance from Egypt. Its importance lies in the deliverance being the occasion of the definitive formation of the Jews as the People of God, as the community of God's manifestation to the world. The celebration takes the form of a communal meal with tremendous ritual prescriptions surrounding what may be eaten. All this is, of course, common knowledge, but apart from the historical connection of the Last Supper and the *Pesach*, we do not seem to give sufficient weight to the connection between the eucharist and this feast.

In this central feast the people of God were nourished and renewed. Without its celebration they would simply cease to be the *qahal* called by God. It is this celebration which has been transformed in the new Israel but which still fulfils many of the functions it fulfilled in the old.

The Christian Qahal.

And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. (Col. 3. 15).

No one comes to the Father, but by me. (John 14. 6).

So we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. (Rom. 12. 5).

The Christian assembly is the paradigm instance of encounter with God, the place in which we encounter him and in which he knows us. All other religious experience which might reasonably be thought of as encounter with God is dependant upon, secondary to, and flows from the eucharist. In the things that the assembly does together Christ reveals himself to us now.

The burden of all Old Testament revelation, of the entire prophetic message is 'And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people' (Lev. 26. 12; Jer. 7. 23; II. 4; 24. 7; 31. 33; Ezek. 11. 20; 14. 11; 37. 27; Hos. 1. 9; 2. 23;). The people of God constantly reject him, and as constantly return to him with, so to say, a purified doctrine, with a more complete grasp of the revelation of God. In the man Jesus is the culmination of the process; at last Israel has totally accepted God, and has totally grasped his revelation. What at first seems to be a failure on God's part, since he does not seem to have made Israel accept him, is in fact his final triumph. For now man has turned definitively to God in Jesus and the time of the new Israel has begun. It is in Jesus, who was to be glorified as Christ, and in the faithful Jews, that the perfection of God's promise to be the God of

Israel, that Israel was to be his people, is opened out as a promise to the New Israel (2 Cor. 6. 16; 1 Pet. 2. 10; Apoc. 21. 3). The man Jesus was sent into the world by God (John 17. 18), but he was also called by God to be the representative of all humanity. As Moses stood before God on Sinai for the people, so Jesus stood for mankind in the final choice between God and the devil. His total acceptance of the call of God resulted in the cross, but the victory is in that acceptance because the man Jesus became, in the Resurrection, the glorified *Kyrios*. His glorification works in every direction, so to say, in space and time. Thus it is that all of creation and its history becomes centred on Christ; history can be seen and re-interpreted as saving history.

The death and glorification of Christ are the supreme moment of the incarnation, its consummation. St John sees the incarnation as a growing reality from the moment of the conception of Jesus until his death, resurrection and glorification. Christ is *Christus Victor* because he is with the Father (Eph. 2. 6), but this is founded on the incarnation; it is only because of the incarnation that it makes sense to talk of Christ being with the Father and of our being present to the Father in him. Yet Christ had to achieve for us the situation he foretells in Jn 14. 16-20: 'And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor, to be with you for ever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him; you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you. I will not leave you desolate; I will come to you. Yet a little while, and the world will see me no more, but you will see me; because I live, you will live also. In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you'. We have to be welded into the 'one body of Christ' (Rom. 12. 5) by the Spirit whom Christ sends from the Father. But Christ can only send the Spirit in virtue of his glorification. The Ascension and Pentecost were 'resurrection events'.¹ They are the stages, so to say, by which we become present to the Father in the glorified *Kyrios*, and also the events which make it possible to call Christ the Lord.

Schillebeeckx has remarked that 'Personal encounter with Christ is the sacrament of our encounter with God'.² It is simply the case that human encounters take place in bodily forms: even influence that might otherwise be described as spiritual, exercised over another, is so exercised through a bodily encounter. Because Jesus showed us the living face of God and because our encounter with Jesus is human, so it is that

¹E. Schillebeeckx O.P., *Worship*, May 1961.

²*Ibid.*

our sacramental encounter with God in Christ is human too. The Spirit that Christ has sent from his Father informs the body of Christ into which we have been baptized, and it is by the Spirit that we are called as individuals to form collectively the redeeming *qahal*.

The dialogue between God and man has been made more intense by the change wrought by Christ. In the old Covenant God was present to his people, and through them to the world; now he is present to the world in his people. The new Israel is Christ revealing himself to the world now. However there are many kinds of meeting between Christians, some of them manifesting a considerable Christian spirit, but not all of them can have the character of a *qahal*. It is clear from the New Testament (Matt. 26. 26-29 etc., Acts 2. 42; 2. 46; 20. 7; 20. 11; 27. 35; I Cor. 10. 16-17; etc.) that the one occasion on which it could be said that here was the Church properly constituted was at the time when the assembly broke bread together. The people of God were summoned to celebrate the sacrifice of thanksgiving and to witness to the announcement of the mystery of salvation; the reading of the word, the thanksgiving, the offering and the breaking of bread were not simply the form of the dedication of the New Israel, but the occasion of their encounter with God in Christ. It was, and is, an encounter that takes place in the community in the same way as the first of these encounters took place (Matt. 26. 26-29 etc.) and including many of the elements of another encounter within the *qahal* at a later date (Acts 2. 1-4). Karl Rahner³ has suggested that in any complete scheme for a treatise of dogmatic theology there must be a discussion of the eucharist as a complete realisation of the Church towards God, Christ and her members, that the eucharist is the central *mysterium* of the Church. Schillebeeckx, in describing Christ as the primordial sacrament (*Ursakrament*⁴), is in fact saying that the humanity of Christ in its unification with the word of God is both our sacramental encounter with God and his sacramental presence to us. Karl Rahner takes a similar line in his essay *Current Problems in Christology*.⁵ But the place of this encounter is precisely the eucharist, where as a community called by God we constitute the Church and make our personal encounter with Christ.

It is here that we complete, so to say, our individuality. For it is here that we are informed by the Holy Spirit in terms of the act we perform communally. We are not at the eucharist in communion with Christ,

³*Theological Investigations*. London 1961.

⁴*Christus, Sacrament van de Godsontmoeting*, Bilthoven, 1960.

⁵*Theological Investigations*, London 1961.

but are the community of saints in Christ; the *Communio Sanctorum*, the sacred communion, the common meal, is an institutionalised form of this communion of saints in Christ—institutionalised because the *qahal*, of its nature, is also a human institution.

In the eucharistic sacrifice we fulfil our function as a 'kingdom of priests and a holy nation' and we become fully 'one body in Christ'. It is the centre, the means, of the work of redemption in and through us for the whole of creation.

There are many ways in which it is possible to think of the eucharist, and there are obviously many more things to be said of it than I have said here, but it seems to me that in England, at any rate, we have paid insufficient attention to the underlying communal nature of our worship. It is in terms of the social nature of the eucharist that we must understand the present desire for liturgical reform, including of course the desire for a vernacular and audible liturgy. It has not infrequently been suggested that there is 'danger' in change, but, as Rahner has observed,⁶ without such 'danger' there is unlikely to be any life. The time seems clearly to have arrived when we must break away from the individualistic piety which seems to have run its course, and return to the living community of earlier days. It would be foolish to construe this as a desire for a 'return' to an earlier century; our reforms must clearly take account of the obvious, life is not the same as it was in the early Church. But it does seem, as Jungmann⁷ never tires of pointing out, that we must recover our original clear understanding of union with one another.

⁶*Free Speech in the Church*, London 1960.

⁷*Public Worship; The Eucharistic Prayer*; etc., London 1956-9.